

*As prepared for delivery*

**CCSSO State of the States Address**  
**Molly Spearman, South Carolina Superintendent of Education and CCSSO**  
**Board President**  
**CCSSO Legislative Conference, March 28, 2022**

Thank you, Carissa. I want to take a moment to thank you and your staff for organizing this event for us and for the support that you all have given us throughout the year.

I am delighted that we are able to gather this week in-person to learn and share ideas and information to better ourselves and ultimately the students and educators in the communities we serve. There are tremendous challenges that we each are facing in our state and that we face collectively in our nation's education system. However, I hope that each of you will look at these challenges as opportunities to meet the vision of CCSSO: "that all students regardless of background, graduate prepared for college, careers, and life."

In March of 2020, roughly two years and two weeks ago today, in response to the unknowns of COVID-19, schools across the nation closed to in-person instruction and shifted to what I like to call emergency remote instruction. When Nebraska Commissioner Matt Blomstedt spoke to us virtually a year ago, he noted that we had no roadmap for what we have experienced in the last year.

Now, another year has passed and we each have more experience, more expertise, and a clearer path forward to recovery and normalcy. Schools are now open, five days a week for in-person instruction, students and teachers are making headway in addressing learning loss and the myriad of social, emotional, and mental health issues caused by the most horrific disruption to learning that we have seen in our lifetime.

The pandemic has also brought on significant incivility across our nation that has trickled down into our classrooms. This presents us with a tremendous opportunity to address and focus more intentionally building the citizens for our nation's future. People who listen to each other – even when we differ in opinion - who value diverse perspectives – though we may not look or sound alike - and strive to make the world a better place through finding middle ground and showing compassion. At this moment when we are all focused on the acceleration of learning, we must address this incivility with respect and determination so that we can move forward.

Since the onset of the pandemic, Congress has passed three stimulus bills that provided nearly \$190.5 billion to states, schools, and districts through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund. This unprecedented amount of money has allowed us a remarkable opportunity to address issues and that pre-existed but were exacerbated by the pandemic. It has challenged us to rethink our systems of instruction and delivery of services to make them more accessible, streamlined, and collaborative.

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While our collective end goal of preparing students for college, career, and life remains the same, each of you and the state's you lead has stepped up in your own unique way to accelerate learning and efficiently and effectively utilize these funds in the way Congress has intended.

Here in D.C., they have committed \$40 million in scaling and supporting high-impact tutoring with a focus on at-risk students and those who have experienced disrupted instruction.

The Iowa Department of Education is investing ESSER funds in the Blended Early Learning in Educational Foundations project with a goal of standing up early childhood and preschool programs that blend childcare and quality early learning experiences for children birth to five.

My neighbors in Georgia are partnering with the Graduation Alliance and dedicating \$5 million in ESSER funds to the location, engagement, and individual support of 50,000 students in rural areas who have disengaged from school or are chronically absent due to COVID-related school disruptions, who are in danger of failing one or more classes, or whose families have requested additional support.

Students with disabilities have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and in Kentucky they have hired specialists to help students with disabilities transition after high school.

In Washington state the Reimagine Education Project encourages educators to think out-of-the-box through grant funds for local pilots to investigate innovative approaches to instruction and social emotional practices with a goal of developing a menu of innovative practices to support continued transformation.

The Centennial State of Colorado launched an ESSER funding opportunities to build career-connected internships and career and technical education programs with a focus on serving students in rural areas.

Throughout the pandemic, we have relied on collaborative partnerships at the federal, state, and local level. From health agencies who provided school operational guidance to organizations that assisted us in serving meals to students and their families, the pandemic forced us to collaborate and to rely on partner organization. In South Carolina and in state's across our nation, we realize we are not in this alone and that in order to meet our goal we must welcome parents, community groups, and other agencies who share in our goal of ensuring student success.

As a longtime music teacher, I knew firsthand the impact that arts education can have on students and the unique ability of the arts to engage students of diverse backgrounds across all subject areas. So when American Rescue Plan funding required state education agencies to set aside funds to address learning loss and provide summer enrichment comprehensive after-school programs, we teamed up with the South Carolina Arts Commission to help schools and teachers fill learning loss gaps in the arts, use arts integration to remediate core subject areas, and provide summer and afterschool learning opportunities that leverage the arts in schools throughout the state. Research

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supports that these stimulating, creative arts experiences engage and motivate students to learn where traditional settings have failed.

In Arkansas, Commissioner Johnny Key and the Arkansas Department of Education launched the Arkansas Tutoring Corps with the goal of building a system of recruiting and training tutors and connecting them with organizations who are equipped to meet the academic needs of students.

North Carolina created the Summer Career Accelerator grant program to fund high-quality, evidence-based learning and workforce aligned summer programs.

New York provided funding to community and faith based organizations to provide academic enrichment, digital literacy, mental health, and family services and support.

Maine set up a Guest School Staff Member campaign with a challenge to businesses, leaders, and citizens to help fill a variety of roles in schools, filling in for or supporting bus drivers, playground monitors, food service workers, teachers, and support staff.

Indiana announced they would utilize \$150 million in grant funds to support community partners and schools summer and fall learning recovery efforts as part of the state's Student Learning Recovery Grant Program.

It is no secret that staffing shortages are plaguing our schools' ability to provide high quality instruction and all the new programs are placing an even greater demand for talent that we were struggling to find even before the pandemic hit. This has brought the recruitment and retention of teachers and staff to the forefront of many of our agendas.

Some of you may have heard of the Call Me MISTER® ( Mentors Instructing Students Toward Effective Role Models) program which began at Clemson University in South Carolina with a goal of increasing the pool of black male teachers to serve in the state's lowest performing elementary schools. Student participants are largely selected from among underserved, socio-economically disadvantaged and educationally at-risk communities. Once they graduate, many go on to teach in the communities where they grew up and attended school. Most impressively, Call Me MISTER graduates have a 100% retention rate - not a single MISTER has left education. What began at Clemson has now expanded to 26 colleges and universities in South Carolina and another 14 colleges in 10 other states. As you might have guessed, investing in this proven, grow your own initiative was a no-brainer for us in South Carolina.

In Tennessee, Commissioner Penny Schwinn and her team are paving the way for teaching and educator workforce development nationwide as they recently announced the Teacher Occupation Apprenticeship program - the first U.S. Department of Labor registered and approved an apprenticeship program for teaching in the country. We will learn more about this game changing initiative tomorrow morning.

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The Mississippi Department of Education's Teacher Residency program is awarding grants to five universities in the state to cover tuition and expenses for up to 240 individuals seeking a graduate degree in elementary and secondary education.

Nevada's Incentivizing Pathways to Teaching Grant Program is providing stipends to support pre-service educators as they complete coursework or student teaching.

Grow Your Own Grants in Missouri are being made available to districts to address staffing shortages by creating or further developing their own programs.

Illinois is covering the cost of tuition for current educators to earn full licensure to teach English learners.

North Dakota's Kirsten Baesler is rewarding and expanding innovative and creative teaching through Teacher Innovation Grants.

While we address learning gaps and make headway in addressing staff shortages, we must not forget the immense stress and exhaustion that many students, families, and educators are facing in their professional and personal lives. Students have gone through traumatic events over the last two years from unstable school operations, to the loss of a loved one from COVID or another illness, to the added responsibility of caring for a younger brother or sister while a parent works another job to make ends meet. In these situations learning must take a back seat as schools have the awesome responsibility for caring for the mental health needs of those entrusted to our care every day. Similarly educators have home lives that may have been upended or they may be feeling the weight of the burden being placed on them by school and district leaders to catch kids up.

In Oklahoma over \$35 million has been awarded to hire school counselors and school-based mental health professionals through a program called the Oklahoma School Counselor Corps. In the Granite State of New Hampshire, they utilized federal ESSER funds to offer mental health training for camp counselors as well as be on site at many camps throughout the state to help with children's mental health needs throughout the summer. Student and teacher mental health has been and must remain a top priority.

Over the last month here in the United States and across the world, students have watched and reacted to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This unprovoked war has caused a humanitarian crisis in Europe and should reinvigorate our collective commitment to teaching civility, protecting and defending our freedoms, and producing good citizens. As I mentioned previously, our country has been marred by incivility and the negative tone of political discourse that has undoubtedly impacted our classrooms. However, if there is one thing that can unite us, it is the desire to graduate students who are prepared, compassionate, confident, and ready to tackle the issues in their lives, careers, and communities. The future of our nation lies in the hands of our 56 million students and their preparation for good citizenship.

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In my state, we have sought to address this in our schools through simple conversations. We set up a book club in partnership with the John Maxwell Leadership Foundation where each week we co-host an hour-long virtual book club meeting that provides an opportunity for a guest host to offer reflections on the assigned chapters and time for discussion and connection in breakout rooms. These conversations have brought back a sense of purpose and passion for those that participate while helping us all learn about diverse perspectives in order to grow and to love one another. These educator driven conversations have trickled down to students who are now being invited to take time out of their day to talk to their classmates about their own problems and their feelings on current topics.

As state education leaders continue to learn from one another at this conference and as we become stronger, more resilient leaders who guide our systems of education out of the pandemic, I leave you with the following quote from Mr. Maxwell.

“The smallest action is better than the biggest intention. No one ever intended their way into greatness. We’ve been waiting on others to change the world. You don’t get attention by talking. You get attention by taking action.”

Thank you and God Bless!